DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 837 UD 028 515

TITLE Asian Diversity: More Than Meets the Eye.
INSTITUTION Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, Calif.
PUB DATE Jan 92
NOTE 16p.; Funding provided by the Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program.
AVAILABLE FROM Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, 320 West Temple Street, Suite 1184, Los Angeles, CA 90012.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; *Cultural Differences; Economic Status; *Ethnic Groups; Health Needs; Immigrants; Languages; *Racial Differences; Refugees; Religious Differences; Urban Culture
IDENTIFIERS California (Los Angeles); *Diversity (Groups)

ABSTRACT

This informational booklet describes the diversity among Asian Americans who, because of similar physical characteristics, are often assumed to be alike. Asian Americans differ not only in their families' national origin, but in just about every other way imaginable, including economic status, life experience, culture, customs, tastes, values, generation, religion, and personality. This booklet describes a range of differences among Asian Americans and gives examples for each under the following topics: (1) affluence; (2) health concerns; (3) differences in the reasons for immigration to the United States or time since arrival in the United States; (4) language differences; (5) generation gaps in language; (6) accents; (7) religious differences; (8) degrees of racial solidarity; and (9) preferences concerning terms used to describe racial or national identity. An appendix contains a summary of Asian immigration history from the 1840s to the present. (JB)

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Asian Diversity: More than Meets the Eye

UO 028 515

Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations

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This booklet is for you if:

You have Asian coworkers, clients, customers, or neighbors. In each of these relationships we benefit from knowing where they're coming from.

We usually learn about a subject group from experience, or from population studies. This booklet deals with a feature of the Asian population that you would otherwise learn about only after extensive experience or study.

If you have not been impressed with differences among Asians, read on. This booklet is for you.

Asian Diversity:

More than Meets the Eye

This booklet is about those Asians who, because of similar physical characteristics, are sometimes assumed to be alike. The assumption is not made of all Asians. Asian Indians, some Filipinos, some Southeast Asians, and some Pacific Islanders are readily distinguished from Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, for instance. They may, in fact, be mistaken for members of non-Asian groups.

Here we will deal with diversity among Asians who, because of similar appearances, are often thought to be the same as one another.

We will not attempt to list all the differences among Asians: who uses chopsticks and who doesn't, who leaves shoes at the door and who doesn't, who bows and who doesn't. Rather, we will speak of the range of differences and give several examples in each section. But they are only examples. Asians you meet can give you other examples.

Radio and television shows, newspaper articles, magazines, and books often speak of Asian traditions and life patterns. We will not repeat that information here. Our objective is to leave you with an impression concerning diversity among Asian Americans.

Telling a Book by Its Cover

To the non-Asian observer Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, some Filipinos, and some Southeast Asians look alike. Asians are often asked how they distinguish between persons of different ancestry. Sometimes they can't. When they can, it is likely to be based on experience, or because the person has a certain facial type. For instance, an Asian woman may remind you of your Korean coworker, or of a Japanese newscaster you've seen on TV.

Asians in Los Angeles County differ not only in their families' national origin, but in just about every other way imaginable, including economic status, life experience, culture, customs, tastes, values, generation, religion, and personality.

For a parallel, think of the difference between French and German people. Most of them, like Asians, are of the same race and come from the same part of the world. Yet we know that there are important differences between them. Take the illustration a step further. We would not expect a visitor from France, an immigrant from France, and a fourth generation American of French heritage to be alike.

Richer or Poorer, Sickness or Health

Consider this: Asians include the electrician at City Hall; the family whose father lives in Taiwan for weeks or months at a time, managing his business; and the seamstress in a garment factory working at or below minimum wage. There is the owner of a coffee shop who struggles to meet the payroll, and the gas station attendant, the beautician, the realtor, and the immigrant who is studying English so he can get a job.

Some Asians get medical care at public health clinics, others are patients of private physicians, covered by private medical insurance. Some suffer from emotional damage, culture shock, mental anguish, flashbacks of war, and the consequences of malnutrition. Others are primarily concerned about high blood pressure, arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, and AIDS.

Land of My Birth, Land of Opportunity, Land of Refuge

Some Asians are, you might say, as American as apple pie. They were born here, have always lived in integrated neighborhoods or predominantly White neighborhoods, and assume that they are an integral part of the total community. Their parents, great-great-grandparents may also have been born here. Older Asians remember living under laws denying one or more Asian groups rights given to other races.

Other Asians, immigrants, were attracted by democracy, private enterprise, freedom of speech, education, and other advantages. Newcomers may never before have experienced life as a racial or ethnic minority person.

A third group, refugees, came because they could not survive in their homelands. They may never before have lived in a nation at peace, where they can look beyond their immediate needs for shelter and food.

Languages, Many Many Languages

An Asian may speak no English, accented English, English with a Southern drawl, hip English, British English, pidgin English, Black English, or just about any style English you can name.

He or she may speak another language, or two or more other languages. And two or more dialects of some languages.

What is a dialect? Sometimes it is only a difference in how words are pronounced, like a Southern accent or a Boston accent, compared to West Coast American English. Or it may be a local form of a language, so different that it cannot be understood by persons of another area.

Two Chinese, for instance, who speak different Chinese dialects, may be able to communicate only in English. Or a Japanese person from Argentina, who speaks no English, and his Japanese American doctor, who speaks no Japanese, may use Spanish. Cambodians and Vietnamese may use French.

There is a vast array of languages and dialects that distinguish people not only by their country of origin, but by region, and province, and even by village. Over 50 Asian languages and dialects are spoken by students of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The more obscure a dialect is, the more private it is to those who speak it. For them it is the familiar reassuring voice of their extended family.

Southern California Asians may speak Spanish but not the language of their forebears. They might be interested in learning it only as you might, to prepare for a trip, or to transfer to a job abroad.

Assumptions about Language

Non-Asians often make the mistake of thinking that an Asian can communicate in any Asian language, or can pronounce names in another Asian language, or can tell whether a name is a man's or a woman's.

Not only non-Asians make assumptions about language. One Asian may assume that another can speak his or her presumed mother tongue. Or that he or she can read and write it. Some immigrants may assume that Asian Americans who speak American English without an accent cannot also speak their ancestral language.

There is some language sharing, though nowhere near as much as is assumed. A Korean who has studied classical literature would be able to read traditional Chinese calligraphy. So could some Japanese. But both they and Chinese Americans who read and write Chinese may be stumped by streamlined modern Chinese writing.

Generation Gaps in Language

Even when Asians speak the same language in the same dialect, there may be generational differences. An older Japanese person is likely to use a more formal Japanese than younger people do. And Japanese Americans who have lived here for the past fifty or sixty years speak an older form of Japanese, without the revisions and slang terms that entered the language since they immigrated.

Although the majority of Asians in the U.S. are foreign born (six or seven out of every ten in the 1980 Census), not all foreign born are newcomers. Among them are many who have lived here longer than they lived in Asia. Some can hardly remember having lived anywhere but here.

Some Asian Americans understand two languages, but speak only English. They may be so accustomed to hearing both languages they don't even notice which language is being used. For example, when a Filipino American is making arrangements with his mother to take her to a doctor's appointment, he is listening for the date, time and place; he may be completely unaware of whether she is speaking Pilipino or English.

Accents

Asian accents can be as great a puzzle to Asian listeners as to anyone. Only people who speak a given Asian language, or are used to hearing English spoken with that language's accent, have an advantage in deciphering it. If, for instance, their father said "soup" for "soap," they readily make the switch.

More than Confucius and Buddha

What Asians believe can be as varied as any other aspect of life. One may be a born-again Christian anxious to bear witness to her conversion; another may be a Muslim whose greatest wish is to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Parents of a bridal couple may consult Asian astrology to pick an auspicious wedding date. Incense might be used by Asians to honor ancestors or to celebrate Catholic mass. One Asian's convictions may lead her to picket a family planning clinic. Another will obey her parents as long as she lives.

Is Blood Thicker than Water?

Asians are reputed to stick together. Perhaps. Sometimes they are inclined to mutual support, particularly among those with whom they have the most in common—families with the same ancestral village, for instance, or persons who they grew up with, people of their generation.

Some Asian children are taught to call their parents' close friends "uncle" or "auntie." Even as adults they use this form of address. It's more respectful than using first names and warmer than using "Mr." or "Mrs."

Mutual support may extend to Asians of different root nationalities and beyond, to non-Asian friends.

Some Asian Americans see other Asians mostly at family dinners, weddings, funerals, and birthday parties. The rest of the time they encounter Asians no more or less than you do—at work, at school, when shopping, and such. If they travel to Asia, they may have the same reactions you would to being surrounded by Asians. They have no more interest in Asian art exhibits, writing, cooking classes and the like than you. They might want to see an exhibit of antique Korean clothing not because it is Korean, but because their work or hobby deals with textiles.

"What are You?"

If you were to ask an Asian, as people have, "What are you?" the answer is likely to be "Korean," or "Cambodian," or whatever ethnic heritage the person has. Later generations might add "American" to signify that they are bicultural. They may be as bicultural as a person of mixed race, but their appearance does not show it.

If an Asian thinks that you are asking what racial group they are from, they may answer your question by saying that they are "Asian," or "Oriental." To some Asians the term "Oriental" is offensive, suggesting mystery and exotic nature; to others it has no such implications.

Self-identity is something that each person must work out for himself or herself. One 10 year old said, "Well, my mom is Chinese. And my dad is Chinese. So I guess I must somehow be Chinese. But I'm just like the other kids."

Many American-born Asians have been asked if they have ever been "back to" Japan, or the Philippines, or wherever their family came from. Indeed, some have been told in anger to "go back." They can't "go back" to where they've never been.

One of a Kind

If you want to relate successfully with Asians, you must let go of any assumptions. You must be willing to learn about each person as you encounter him or her.

You should not be surprised to learn that there are Muslim Asians, Asians who are crazy about skiing and uninterested in martial arts, Asians who can enjoy a shouting match as much as anyone, Asians for whom their ethnicity is entirely incidental, Asians who are constantly aware of their ethnicity, Asians who look you in the eye and Asians who don't, Asians who think that revealing emotions is beautiful, Asians who think it wrong under any circumstances, Asians who want to get right down to business, and Asians who think directness is crude and crass.

The next Asian you meet might not be able to tell you the date of the next Lunar New Year's Day, the difference between light soy sauce and dark, the theory behind acupuncture, the approximate population of Singapore, or the year when the first Asians came to California. On the other hand, he or she might. If you are tempted to say that they should know these things, you should examine your expectations.

If you would be respectful of Asians, you must relate with individuals, each different from the others.

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appendix

Immigration History

(This summary is excerpted from Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles: A Demographic Profile, *by Paul Ong and Tania Azores, published by the Public Policy Project, Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, June 1991.)*

Los Angeles' Asian Pacific American population has been shaped by a history of immigration flows and restrictive legislation dating to the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1850s to the 1930s the flows originated in succession from China, Japan, and the Philippines. Each flow was terminated by restrictive regulations when, as their numbers grew, the Chinese, then the Japanese and, later, the Filipinos were seen as threats to society.

The first wave of Asian immigrants began in 1848 with the arrival in California of a large group of Chinese driven from their homeland by a series of natural disasters and famine and lured by the economic opportunities created by the discovery of gold in the state. While the Chinese were recruited by employers as a source of cheap and exploitable labor, their presence was resented as undesirable competitors by many whites, particularly organized labor. Acting under pressure from California, Congress enacted several laws to stop Chinese immigration. In 1862, it enacted a law that made it illegal to import "oriental slave labor, or coolies." This was followed, in 1879, by a law prohibiting American ships from bringing in more than 15 Chinese passengers at a time, and finally, the infamous 1882 law, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned the entry of Chinese altogether for 10 years. The impact of the latter can be readily seen in the number of Chinese in Los Angeles, which dropped from 4,424 in 1890 to 2,602 in 1910, and 2,592 in 1920.

The Japanese filled the vacuum left by the exclusion of the Chinese. Numbering only 36 in 1890, the County's Japanese population was 8,461 in 1910. As was the case with the Chinese, the growth rate of the Japanese, in Los Angeles as well as throughout the state, was seen as a threat to society. Thus, the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 limiting the immigration of Japanese workers was drawn between the United States and Japan. This was followed by the 1917 Immigration Act which set up an Asia-Pacific Triangle and barred the entry of all persons from that area, except for certain limited categories of individuals. This act effectively ended Japanese immigration.

With the doors closed on China and Japan, the Philippines became the source of cheap agricultural labor for California because, as a colony of the United States, it was not included in the prohibitions of the Immigration Act. The U.S. census reports that the State's Filipino population grew by more than tenfold between 1920 and 1930, from less than 3,000 to more than 30,000. While no Los Angeles County population figures for Filipinos are available prior to 1950 at which time they numbered 7,117, the census reports that there were 4,498 in the City of Los Angeles in 1940. Despite their status as colonial subjects of the United States, Filipinos were not immune to the anti-Asian hostilities. However, being nationals of the United States, their entry to this country could only be blocked by granting the Philippines their independence. This was achieved with the Philippine Independence Act of 1934, which restricted their entry to 50 persons a year.

For the next three decades, Asian immigration was minuscule. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1942, but an annual quota of 105 still remained. Furthermore, the provisions of the 1917 Act barring all others from the Asia-Pacific region continued in effect. With the arrival of independence in 1946, the Philippine quota was raised from 50 to 100. The year also saw the passage of the War Brides Act permitting the entry of foreign-born spouses and children of military personnel. Through a combination of War Brides, political refugees, and the emergence of a second and third generation, the Asian Pacific population grew, from 49 thousand in 1940 to 115 thousand by 1960. With severe limitations on immigration, American-born Asians gained dominance in the community in the period after the depression until the liberalization of immigration in the mid-sixties.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 marked a turning point in American immigration history as the removal of restrictions on immigration from Asia and the Pacific region spurred a continuing flow of immigrants from that region. After more than eight decades of discrimination, Asian countries were placed on equal footing with European countries. The 1965 Act gave each Asian country a national quota of 20,000 per year, and provided avenues for the entry of non-quota immigrants. The end of the Vietnam War also contributed to the community's rapid growth. Since 1975, Asians from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have been major beneficiaries of the refugee provisions of the 1965 Act.

The influx from Asia and the Pacific helped swell Los Angeles' Asian Pacific population from 198 thousand in 1970 to 457 thousand in 1980, and 954 thousand in 1990. This rapid growth has propelled Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles into national prominence. In 1990, there were more Asian Pacifics here than in all of Hawaii, or any other metropolitan area on the mainland. Within California, approximately one in three Asian Pacifics live in Los Angeles.

Postscript

Commission booklets such as this are produced to provide general information concerning different groups of people.

This one focuses on diversity within the Asian population, with an overview of immigration history in the appendix.

While the text was being developed, Asian reviewers read drafts and sometimes suggested changes.

The Commission welcomes your comments and suggestions as well.
Please send them to:

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Acknowledgments

This booklet is made available
as a public educational service by:

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The Commission thanks Asian Americans who granted interviews, reviewed drafts, and offered comments and suggestions.

Special thanks go to Dr. Paul M. Ong and Tania Azores for authorizing use of excerpts from their study of *Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles: A Demographic Profile.*

We gratefully acknowledge artist Yee-King Yim for his gift of the cover art. Mr. Yim's work has been recognized with exhibitions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Southern California.

This booklet was written by Carole Chan and prepared for publication by Troy Dial. Both are members of Commission staff.

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Typography, design & mechanicals by —

Sheldon Katz' *Graphic Solutions*
Long Beach, CA.

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